

Similarities and Differences between Land and Sea: On China's Maritime and Water Culture

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Abstract— This paper discusses maritime and water culture in Chinese tradition, primarily from the perspectives of linguistic metaphor and travel (you). It is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the characteristics of maritime mentality and thought, for which many Western works provide excellent explanations, although some may carry the taint of Western-centrism—particularly when they view China or the East from a "maritime" perspective. The second section attempts to explain the conventional comparative framework of land culture versus maritime culture through historical antecedents and consequences. The third section seeks to "discover China in China"; to use Zhuangzi's words, it aims to "trace things back to their roots" by exploring China's maritime and water culture within its own tradition. The final section provides a brief conclusion.

Keywords— Ocean, Land, Language, Historiography, Earthbound China

I. MARITIME THOUGHT

Maritime thought has often been expressed in numerous myths. The unpredictability of the sea, its tempestuous waves, its capacity to overturn oceans and roll up vast billows, its fickle and fathomless nature—all these are reflected in Greek myths involving figures like Poseidon, Venus, Odysseus, Medea, and Jason, whose deep connections with the sea are evident. Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, wielder of the trident, ruled over the oceans, storms, and could cause tsunamis and earthquakes. Possessed of powerful desires and fierce ambition, he conspired with Apollo and Athena to overthrow Zeus, a plot that ultimately failed, resulting in Zeus banishing him to the mortal realm, where he later helped build the walls of Troy for King Laomedon. Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty—celebrated in Shakespeare's long poems—was actually born from the sea foam and presided over fertility and navigation. These myths and stories, whether concerning the Trojan War launched by a Greek coalition for the beautiful Helen, or Jason leading the Argonauts on a distant quest for the Golden Fleece, or Perseus using Medusa's head (or a sword, by other accounts) to slay the sea monster Cetus—such maritime tales are filled with heroes, lust, love, and incest, surging with the tempestuous sea, reaching dramatic climaxes of

immense complexity. In these narratives, the sea embodies both divinity and humanity, serving as an extension of political and individual will.

Shifting our gaze from myth to academic inquiry, Western scholarship has produced many brilliant studies centered on the sea. Classic works include Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* and Anthony Reid's *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*. These studies, whether transnational or trans-epochal, treat the ocean as a spatial subject in itself—constituting what is termed "ocean space." The history of human interaction, exploration, competition, and cooperation across the seas is also reflected in Western textbooks and academic fields[1], such as underwater archaeology[2], Western maritime navigation activities, or general histories of naval warfare[3].

Of course, earlier scholarship may have its limitations. Viewed from a contemporary standpoint, some of these Western works on the ocean, or studies comparing and examining Sino-Western interaction and exchange, have not entirely avoided a Western-centric perspective. As Yang Guozhen has observed: "Maritime nation" belongs to the aforementioned Western academic

discourse system; it is both an unconscious manifestation of Western dominance and part of 'Western discursive hegemony.' We urgently need to distinguish its universal value from its specific significance through historical examination[4]." Viewing China, or comparing East and West, from such an angle easily falls into the three problematic frameworks that Paul A. Cohen cautioned against: "impact-response," "tradition-modernity," and "imperialism." This approach risks persistently imposing such "outsider" questions onto Chinese history, replicating externally imposed problematics while neglecting China's own internal dynamics of change.

II. LAND CULTURE AND MARITIME CULTURE

However, to borrow the title of Cohen's book, if we genuinely seek to "discover history in China" and examine maritime culture through the lens of Chinese culture itself, we often find ourselves drawn into comparative frameworks. This might involve Sino-Western comparisons—contrasting flood myths, navigational technologies, or the scale of naval warfare. Alternatively, another approach interprets the very fabric of traditional Chinese culture, viewing China as fundamentally agrarian, a nation founded on agriculture, thereby rendering characteristics like *xiangtu* (native soil), *tudi* (land), *nidi* (muddy earth), and *ludi* (dry land) as defining Chinese traits. Many derived concepts and behaviors are linked to this premise, epitomized by Fei Xiaotong's seminal work, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. Consequently, notions like "attachment to one's native land and reluctance to migrate" (*antu zhongqian*) and being "earthy" (*tuli tuqi*) are connected to textual sources like the *Classic of Poetry* and archaeological findings at sites like Hemudu. Agricultural culture and agrarian civilization thus become posited as the bedrock of Chinese culture. However, in Fei Xiaotong's analysis, *xiangtu* (native soil/local land mentality) is intricately linked with concepts like the differential mode of association (*chaxu geju*), morality, ritual propriety (*li*), kinship, the gentry, and ties of blood and locality, collectively forming China's foundational character—a persistent *basso continuo*. Fei did not attach excessive disparagement to this; indeed, he often praised it. Yet, when such descriptions are juxtaposed with traits associated with a maritime mentality—adventure, enterprise, proactiveness, initiative, innovation—a deliberate contrast emerges, favoring one over the other. This imbues the comparison between land and maritime cultures with implicit value judgments. In the late 1980s, the influential television documentary *River Elegy* (He Shang) deliberately contrasted the "azure blue" with the "loess yellow" spirit: "The entire system of Confucian

thought articulated the norms and ideals of an inland civilization. During the flourishing period of Eastern feudal society, it was evidently relatively reasonable. However, the unification of thought under a single doctrine weakened pluralistic development. The rich elements of maritime civilization in ancient life, like a few slender, clear springs, trickled onto the loess plateau of inland civilization and vanished without a trace[5]." Viewed retrospectively, this perspective contains many unsubstantiated assumptions. The notions of "loess" and agricultural origins are, in fact, deeply intertwined with the genesis of Chinese civilization and cannot be oversimplified.

From the perspective of intellectual history, the critique of land-based culture using maritime culture as a yardstick, culminating in an explanation for China's modern backwardness vis-à-vis Western strength—and thus the imperative to catch up and surpass Britain and America—this line of reasoning has discernible historical causes and consequences. Faced with internal strife and external threats in modern times, how was China to be saved? Through enlightening the populace or national salvation? Or perhaps both concurrently? Through "Chinese learning for fundamental principles, Western learning for practical application" (*Zhongti Xiyong*)? *Statecraft historiography*? The revival of non-Confucian philosophical schools? Or interpreting Western learning through Buddhism? From the images of the "Sick Man," the "Yellow Peril," and the "Sleeping Lion" to the discourses of *Zhongti Xiyong*, wholesale Westernization, and thorough modernization, this comparative mindset clearly has a traceable lineage[6]. The comparison between China and the West, China's learning from the West, China's perceived inferiority and the corresponding praise for the West—this forms what A. O. Lovejoy termed a "Great Chain of Being." Yet, as times change and eras shift, concepts undergo transformation. Though names may remain the same, their substance differs; concepts themselves become alienated, potentially evolving into a social history of thought. We can often discern their significance from the perspective of their specific historical context.

While the Mediterranean maritime character was mentioned earlier, the West also possesses its own "land-based character." This is particularly evident in the "nomadic civilization historiography" that has gained prominence in recent decades—a perspective that contrasts with the orthodox Central Plains narrative, akin to a steppe-centric historical view. This phenomenon is not unique to China. From roughly the second to the eighth century CE, Europe was frequently embroiled in warfare and chaos, partly due to Persian power and partly due to

groups Europeans then labeled "barbarians." Regarding the barbarian question, Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* attributes Rome's weakening to imperial misrule and moral decay, the growing power of the military, issues surrounding aristocratic privileges, the erosion of civic spirit, and societal luxury. Crucially, he also identifies the spread of Christianity and barbarian invasions. In essence, these "barbarians" were often nomadic peoples migrating across the Eurasian landmass—from Zhangjiakou to the steppes stretching towards the Black and Caspian Seas—constituting a major driving force in world history. Their epochal significance in world history is evident from the Qin and Han dynasties in China through to the Timurid Empire, the Turkicized Mongols, the Ottoman Empire, and the Mughal Empire in India—all representing periods where steppe peoples played pivotal roles on the global stage.

Consequently, the center of gravity in Eurasian continental history may not rest solely with Han Chinese or settled agricultural/pastoral societies, but rather with these nomadic peoples. Previously dismissed as uncivilized barbarians, outsiders, or aliens, known only for warfare and plunder, the reality is more complex. They often served as crucial agents of circulation and transmission across Eurasia—conveying plants, goods, technologies, institutions, financial systems, conceptual frameworks, religions, scripts, languages, texts, marital customs, knowledge, animals, and even pathogens.

Japanese scholar Sugiyama Masaaki, in his *A World History of Nomads*, adopts this very perspective—that of "land-based thought"—to analyze the significance of Kublai Khan. He posits that the grand Eurasian trading sphere can be demarcated around the year 1260. In Chinese history, 1260 was the first year of the Jingding era under Emperor Lizong of the Southern Song, and the first year of the Zhongtong era in Mongol-ruled China, marking the ascension of Kublai Khan. Prior to 1260, the Mongol Empire's political base was on the Mongolian Plateau, with its territory stretching roughly from the Sea of Japan westward to the mouth of the Danube, Anatolia, and the eastern Mediterranean coast. Subsequently, Kublai Khan, prioritizing internal consolidation before external expansion, first addressed domestic political challenges. Meanwhile, the Khanates of Jochi in the northwest, Hulegu in the south, and Chagatai in Central Asia gradually grew stronger. The Mongol Empire thus transformed into a "Great Yuan Ulus" centered on Kublai Khan's lineage, effectively a kind of "world federation" encompassing the three aforementioned Khanates. Within this federation, multilingualism, multiethnicity, and multiscriptural practices defined a new type of imperial

polity. Across the Eurasian continent, this federal empire sought to integrate various regions from discrete points into interconnected lines and surfaces through diverse commercial and financial activities involving economic logistics and trade. Kublai Khan's eventual southward campaign against the Southern Song, while motivated by various political and military rationales, was also clearly driven by economic and trade considerations. Sugiyama Masaaki argues that Kublai Khan envisioned merging the traditional Mongol steppe military power with the immense economic might of Chinese society—then the largest in the Eurasian world—to forge a multi-layered, three-dimensional grand empire. Furthermore, he aimed to integrate this with Muslim commercial networks, specifically those of Persian-speaking Iranian Muslims, to inaugurate a new era of economic integration. This commercial network also included the Uighurs. These policies, doctrines, and transmissions were all historically driven by land-based modes of thought.

Conversely, what of China's own maritime character or maritime thought? Much research has emerged reflecting on land-based thought through the lens of Chinese maritime activity, comparing the two, or advocating for a balanced consideration, accumulating significant findings. Building upon these prior achievements—standing on the shoulders of giants—the next section will explore China's traditional maritime and water culture from alternative angles, specifically focusing on linguistic metaphors and the concept of you(travel, roaming).

III. DISCOVERING THE SEA AND WATER IN CHINA

Whether involving travel (you) or dwelling (ju), whether pertaining to land or sea, both constitute integral components of Chinese tradition. The ancients fully grasped the physical properties of the sea and water, employing them as expressions of linguistic thought. For instance, Laozi favored water as a metaphor for the Dao, representing softness, receptivity, and immense plasticity[7]. The use of such conceptual objects is intrinsically linked to their inherent properties and cultural context. Thinkers leverage these characteristics to construct and articulate their philosophical systems, offering explanations and descriptions until the object and the principle it illustrates become fused—using the object to explicate the principle, or using the principle to illuminate the object, mutually reinforcing each other. As Mencius stated, "For all things of the same kind, there is a fundamental resemblance." Indeed, water, as a fundamental element, provides ample scope for

imaginative elaboration. Pre-Qin philosophers were largely active in what is today Shandong Province. According to current research, rainfall, river systems, and lake coverage were far more abundant then than now. Moreover, the North China Plain of that era was densely covered with forests and marshes; Zhu Kezhen concluded that the climate during the Warring States period was warmer and more temperate than it is today[8]. In such an environment, it is unsurprising that many Pre-Qin thinkers possessed a far deeper observational understanding of "water" than we might imagine. Although Zhuangzi was primarily active around Shangqiu in modern Henan, he was exceptionally familiar with the myths of the Yan-Qi coastal region (modern Hebei-Shandong). He readily drew upon maritime allusions and legends, frequently employing them as linguistic metaphors, such as references to the Lacquer Garden (Qiyuan), Changsang Jun, Changsang Gongzi, and the culture of the Eastern Sea. Even imagery frequently used by Zhuangzi—wind, birds—bears the imprint of the maritime character associated with the Yan-Qi coast[9].

As mentioned, water and the sea served as metaphors whose physical properties were grasped and understood by thinkers, subsequently integrated into their respective philosophical stances as vital components linking Heaven and humanity, cultivating the self and establishing proper human conduct. However, while self-cultivation is a universal concern, according to French philosopher Pierre Hadot, ancient philosophical schools—whether Socratic, Platonic, Stoic, or Epicurean—generally insisted that philosophy was primarily a way of life practiced rather than merely a system of thought contemplated[10]. Nevertheless, even so, their approaches to using metaphor for self-cultivation differed significantly. For Plato, the relationship between Heaven and humanity could be characterized as one of "imitation" (mimesis). He advocated that humans should emulate the orderly motions of the celestial bodies; the harmony of the heavens provided the ideal model for the earthly polis. Thus, one should seek harmony and avoid conflict, modeling oneself on the natural progression of the seasons. In terms of this "imitative" function of metaphor, Chinese and Western traditions possess some common ground. Yet, the metaphorical language of Pre-Qin thinkers is replete with imagery of the sea and water, making it rather distinctive.

In Chinese culture, however, the sea and water transcend their role as mere metaphorical tools for philosophical self-cultivation; they are also the subject of a vast body of literary works. Examples include Wang Can's "Rhapsody on Roaming the Sea" (You Hai Fu), Mu Hua's "Rhapsody on the Sea" (Hai Fu), Pan Yue's "Rhapsody on

the Vast Sea" (Cang Hai Fu), Qiu Guangting's "Discourse on the Sea Tides" (Hai Chao Lun), Fan Yangyuan's "Rhapsody on All Waters Returning to the Sea" (Zhong Shui Gui Hai Fu), and many more, too numerous to list exhaustively. These writings encompass factual accounts, plain descriptions, imaginative fictions, and blends of reality and fantasy. Various flora and fauna associated with the sea—ocean fish, giant clams, divine conches, small islands, sacred trees, corals—all find their place within them. Furthermore, China's historical maritime activities constitute a key focus of research in diplomatic history, economic history, and the history of cultural exchange. Chen Guodong even argues that after the arrival of Europeans in East Asia and up until the eighteenth century, maritime trade at various levels within Asia, including China, not only failed to disappear but encountered new opportunities and developments[11]. Haneda Masashi similarly points out that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the era of the East India Companies' burgeoning trade—Asia, including its Chinese participants, experienced its own "Asian century." Numerous individuals traversed the oceans for long-distance endeavors: merchants, migrants, speculators, laborers, mercenaries, poets, literati, and political refugees, all in substantial numbers[12].

IV. REDISCOVERING TRADITIONAL CHINESE WATER CULTURE

China's traditional maritime and water culture encompasses far more than the aspects discussed above; there is much left to explore. To offer another example, consider Li Diaoyuan's *Ran Xi Zhi* ("Records of Burning Rhino Horn," a title alluding to illuminating the depths) from the Qing Dynasty. Existing research on this work predominantly focuses on its classification of aquatic products and fish species, with papers appearing in journals like *Ancient and Modern Agriculture*, reflecting the scholarly efforts invested in these areas.

However, works on aquatic products should also be understood as belonging to China's broader tradition of bowu (broad learning about things, natural history). The Pre-Qin bowu tradition was already remarkably rich. The *Classic of Poetry* encourages familiarity with the names of birds, beasts, plants, and trees; the Sao-style poetry of the Chuci excels in vivid descriptions of objects. Even Confucius, while asserting that one should "set one's heart upon the Way," also advocated "finding relaxation in the arts" (you yu yi). The original meaning of yi (art) relates to cultivation and planting, inherently concerned with "things." It also encompassed the Six Arts (rites, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, mathematics),

demonstrating the breadth and richness expected of a gentleman's learning, later extending to skill and artistry, further solidifying its connection to bowu knowledge. When Fan Chi inquired about farming and gardening, Confucius professed inferior knowledge compared to experienced farmers and gardeners. This was not a dismissal of such practical matters—he himself acknowledged his humble origins and competence in various menial tasks—but rather an insistence that one's ultimate aim must align with the Way, with concern for the wider world. Overemphasis on such narrow technicalities risked becoming what Confucius termed a "petty person" (xiaoren). Other texts, like the *Lüshi Chunqiu* ("Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals"), with its twelve "Almanacs," eight "Examinations," and six "Discourses"—a vast compendium—comprehensively discuss the myriad phenomena of Heaven and Earth. From the Han Dynasty onward, literary depictions expanded greatly: descriptions of beautiful women, accounts of fairylands, eulogies of capitals, observations of natural phenomena, laments on fate, veiled critiques of contemporary affairs—all grounded in emotional responses to and engagement with the external world. The scope of depicted objects had become extremely broad. During the Six Dynasties, landscape poetry, palace-style verse, agricultural treatises, works on materia medica, geographical gazetteers, and bowu compilations flourished—works like Lu Ji's *Mao Shi Cao Mu Niao Shou Chong Yu Shu* ("Commentary on Plants, Trees, Birds, Beasts, Insects, and Fish in the Mao Version of the Classic of Poetry"), Zhang Hua's *Bo Wu Zhi* ("Record of the Investigation of Things"), Guo Yigong's *Guang Zhi* ("Expanded Records"), and Guo Pu's commentaries on the *Erya*. These were numerous. These practices of observing, experiencing, and empathizing with things provided immense intellectual nourishment for literati and scholars, simultaneously refracting contemporary modes of understanding the world. Guo Pu thus emphasized the importance of the *Erya* precisely from this bowu perspective: "It is a means to comprehend the essence of glosses and exegesis, to recount the evocative imagery of the poets, to gather the distinct expressions of bygone eras, and to distinguish entities that share the same reality but bear different names. Truly, it is the ford and bridge across the Nine Streams of thought, the key and lock to the Six Arts, the deep pool for those who wish to learn broadly, the flourishing garden for those who gather literary blooms. Should one desire broad knowledge without perplexity and familiarity with the names of birds, beasts, plants, and trees, nothing approaches the *Erya*[13]." The bowu tradition has deep and well-documented historical roots.

More importantly, if we situate works like Li Diaoyuan's within the social milieu of the Ming and Qing dynasties, cataloging the types and appearances of aquatic creatures and fish cannot be viewed solely through the lens of modern taxonomy or fisheries science. Returning to the intellectual climate of that era, such endeavors were integral to the aesthetics of everyday life cultivated by Ming-Qing literati. This involved both extensive learning and the refinement of personal temperament, expressed through connoisseurship of painting and calligraphy, gastronomy, furniture, travel, gardening, and attire. It represented an "elegant" lifestyle constructed from an attitude of leisurely appreciation, shaping class identity and distinguishing oneself from the vulgar mundane. Works like *Zun Sheng Ba Jian* ("Eight Discourses on the Art of Living"), *Chang Wu Zhi* ("Treatise on Superfluous Things"), *You Ju Ya Bian* ("Elegant Compilation on Travel Implements"), *Lü Yuan Cong Hua* ("Collected Talks from the Garden of Tracks"), *Ping Shi* ("History of Flower Vases"), and *Tao An Meng Yi* ("Dream Memories of Tao'an") all stem from similar sensibilities. The *zhi* (records/treatise) in *Ran Xi Zhi* aligns with the broader tradition of specialized treatises, akin to the structure of *Chang Wu Zhi*, which states: "This compilation is divided into twelve categories: Dwellings, Flowers and Trees, Water and Stones, Birds and Fish, Calligraphy and Painting, Tables and Couches, Utensils, Arrangement, Clothing and Adornment, Boats and Carriages, Vegetables and Fruits, Incense and Tea." "All matters pertaining to leisurely pursuits and refined pleasures are meticulously included, drawing broadly from Zhao Xihu's *Dong Tian Qing Lu* as a distant source and closely referencing Tu Long's *Kao Pan Yu Shi* as a contemporary companion[14]." While current scholarship has extensively explored the lives of Ming-Qing literati, linking these studies with maritime thought could potentially yield new insights. Thus, it is evident that "discovering the sea and water in China"—when firmly situated within the specific historical context, social atmosphere, and popular mentality, and approached through the lenses of new cultural history, history of ideas, or microhistory—offers tremendous potential for enriching, deepening, reshaping, or charting new courses in maritime-related research, leading to more diverse and fruitful outcomes.

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